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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Barometer

Developments in Geneva's International Organisations

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The “Geneva Barometer” takes an occasional look at a few selected developments amongst the international organisations based in Geneva.

Ever since the middle of March, the fight against COVID-19 has almost completely dominated the agendas of all the well-known international organisations represented in Geneva¹. These efforts were also the main focus of the World Health Assembly on 18 and 19 May. It was possible to pass an ambitious resolution here despite the considerable geopolitical tensions that surrounded the virtual meeting. Nevertheless, several other notable developments also occurred in multilateral Geneva, not least Roberto Azevêdo's surprising announcement that he would be stepping down from his role as Director-General of the WTO.

Global Health – A Pioneering World Health Assembly

The 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA) convened with a reduced agenda on 18 and 19 May and was held virtually for the first time ever. The 194 member states of the World Health Organisation (WHO) passed a pioneering resolution² during the assembly in order to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic together through collective, global measures. The intention had been to discuss the issue of “Nursing Staff and Midwives”, but the assembly focused on combating the global pandemic in addition to the (partial) re-

election of the Executive Board³. A continuation of the WHA's reduced session is planned for the end of the year, probably in November.

The two-day meeting involved all of the WHO member states' health ministers and 14 heads of state who were present to participate in the opening and closing sessions, one of whom was the German Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel. It was consistently stressed at the gathering that global unity is the most powerful tool in the fight against the pandemic. The resolution, which was initiated by the European Union and its member states and which was supported by more than 140 countries, is the concrete manifestation of this appeal and constitutes a roadmap for bringing the pandemic under control. It demands an intensification of the efforts being made at national and international level to combat the pandemic. Its implementation would guarantee a coordinated, coherent and fair reaction to the pandemic, which would save both lives and livelihoods. The resolution underlines the importance of multilateral cooperation within the United Nations in response to the crisis. Speaking at the

¹ You can find detailed analyses of what is happening in the multilateral organisations in Geneva with regard to COVID-19 on the KAS Geneva Office [homepage](#).

² The adopted resolution can be viewed [here](#).

³ The WHO's Executive Board³ is composed of 34 persons who are technically qualified in the healthcare field. They are each nominated by a member state of the World Health Assembly. Member states are elected for three years. The following countries were elected to form part of the Executive Board, on which Germany also has a seat: Botswana, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Columbia, India, Russia, United Kingdom, Oman, South Korea.

WHA, UN Secretary-General António Guterres criticised the lack of unity across the globe in tackling the pandemic. By contrast, numerous member states used their video messages to heap praise on the WHO and its Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus for the leading role they have played in managing the response to the crisis. The key role played by the WHO as the coordinator of the crisis and its responsibility for guaranteeing fair access to and a fair distribution of all of the fundamental health technologies and products required for combating the virus were also underlined by member states, including the German Chancellor.

The resolution's key passages concern a commitment to a voluntary pooling of patents and a demand for equal access to vaccines and therapeutic agents. The opportunity to circumvent international patent law is also explicitly stated (reference is made to the use of the corresponding provisions in the TRIPS Agreement). This is certainly a major step. The USA, among others, attempted to shape this passage more conservatively. It is also significant that many heads of government and ministers, including from larger countries, classified future COVID-19 vaccines as a global public good, implying that they will be affordable and freely accessible.

The resolution emphasises the promotion of research and development financed by the private sector and governments. This includes open innovation in all relevant fields and the exchange of all relevant information with the WHO. An important role may be played by the COVID-19 technology platform proposed by Costa Rica. This will launch on 29 May and aims to eliminate barriers to effective vaccines, medicines and health products.

Another important aspect of the resolution is the request made by many countries that an unbiased, independent and comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the global response of all governments and international committees to the pandemic be undertaken, including, but not limited to, the work of the WHO. In this regard, the resolution stresses that the acute management of the crisis should take priority in the current situation. Furthermore, the emergence and

spread of the pandemic is to be investigated and a review of the International Health Regulations published in 2005 will be carried out. It is essential that lessons will be learned from the current crisis in order to strengthen the global community in preparation for possible pandemics and health crises in future. The German Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, emphasised the importance of better early warning mechanisms and greater research cooperation. A time frame for the investigation was not determined. Tedros Ghebreyesus confirmed at the WHA that he would initiate an independent evaluation at the earliest suitable opportunity.

Furthermore, it was noteworthy that a number of member states used their video messages to raise the question of financing the WHO in a more sustainable manner. German Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn also warned that it was necessary to increase the WHO's independence from external influences. He announced that Germany would present a concept for reforming the WHO together with France and that Germany would develop the concept further during its EU Council Presidency.

The acceptance of the resolution should be seen as a success for the WHA. Even though member states are of course responsible for its implementation, it will still generate important political momentum. Prior to the WHA, more than a few observers had feared that geopolitical tensions, especially between the USA and China, would completely overwhelm the WHA. This did not prove to be true to the extent feared. Nevertheless, the dispute did play a role once more. In any case, the way in which the two global heavyweights behaved at the WHA could hardly have been more different.

It is true that the USA did not block the resolution, preferring instead to distance itself from several of its formulations. These included, among others, demands for general, rapid and equal access to a vaccine and the call for the pooling of patents. In addition, demands for the waiving of intellectual property rights would "send the wrong message to innovators, who are of fundamental importance (...) to the solution". Nevertheless, the USA was the only country

which expressed itself in firmly critical terms. At the WHA, USA Health Minister Alex Azar restated the reasons for the escalation of the pandemic, namely, that the WHO had failed to provide necessary information about the outbreak in China early enough. A letter to WHO Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus published on Twitter by Trump during the WHA also caused a public stir. In it, accusations which are mostly already known were levelled at the WHO again. Furthermore, the US President threatened to end the country's payments to the WHO and reconsider its membership of the organisation if it did not put forward reform proposals within 30 days. Tedros Ghebreyesus did not address the letter or the accusations during the WHA. Only after the assembly had concluded did he refer to a report issued by the independent oversight committee that is responsible for the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme. It had praised the WHO's leadership during the crisis and warned against an increasing politicisation of the answer to the pandemic.

It was a completely different story for China. The WHO had invited both Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping to the opening and closing sessions of the WHA as participating heads of state. Trump's refusal gave Xi Jinping a platform on which to affirm his support for the resolution and to announce a contribution of \$2 billion to the fight against the coronavirus. China also committed itself to making a vaccination against COVID-19 available to the whole world should China be the first country to develop one. Xi Jinping defended his country against accusations and criticism that China had covered up the outbreak and insisted that the country had consistently responded with openness (!) and transparency (!!).

Conversely, the request made by 13 countries in the run up to the WHA that Taiwan be permitted to participate in the WHA as an observer, which is supported by the USA, New Zealand, Japan, Canada and Australia but which is indignantly opposed by Beijing and its allies, has been postponed until the follow-up session in November. It seems that intensive diplomatic efforts were still being made at the weekend in an attempt to prevent a public scandal over this question at a WHA operating on a tight schedule.

World Trade Organisation – A Personnel Shock in Turbulent Times

After the WTO had suffered a heavy blow in December with the suspension of the Appellate Body, it was expected that the first semester would be wholly characterised by intensive negotiations ahead of the Ministerial Conference scheduled for June in the Kazakh capital of Nur-Sultan. The hope was that the conference would boost world trade and that it would demonstrate the WTO's capacity for action. However, COVID-19 has thwarted these plans too. The Ministerial Conference has been postponed and is not expected to take place until summer 2021 or even the end of 2021.

Then on 14 May came the surprising announcement from the WTO's incumbent Director-General of seven years, Roberto Azevêdo, that he would be stepping down from his position as of 31 August 2020. His time in office was scheduled to continue for exactly one more year. He cited a strategic reasons for his decision in addition to personal ones: the forthcoming Ministerial Conference, which is regarded as particularly important, needs to be prepared for sufficiently. He opined that parallel discussions about his successor in the coming year would torpedo this. Despite this understandable reasoning, his resignation comes at a highly inopportune time:

1. It will strengthen the impression of a crisis-ridden WTO, a view that has held sway in public since the dispute settlement crisis.
2. Even though many dossiers cannot be negotiated further at the moment, the WTO plays an important role in this way in the fight against (often unreported) trade-restricting measures introduced by member states in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.
3. There is no guarantee that the succession will actually have been organised by the end of August. If the months-long impasse around the chair of the fisheries negotiations at the end of 2019 is taken as a yardstick, a quick agreement on the matter is an ambitious undertaking indeed.

There is likely to be fierce competition for the position. In order to find as rapid a solution as possible, a short window for the submission of applications has been specified. It will open on 8 June and close on 8 July. The running seems to be open. Plenty of names of primarily European and African candidates are already being touted and not just in Geneva. So far, the Deputy Director-General of the WTO Yonov Frederick Agah (Nigeria), the Swiss-Egyptian Abdelhamid Mamdouh, who has many years of experience at the WTO, and Benin's ambassador to the UN, Eloi Laourou, have thrown their hats into the ring. Furthermore, the name of Amina Mohamed (Kenya), who organised a WTO Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in 2015 as Kenya's foreign minister of the time, can also be heard. African representatives are insisting that the time is ripe for the first Director-General from their continent. By contrast, representatives from the USA, Canada and the EU argue that it is time for a candidate from the developed world again. Consequently, the names of European representatives are also circulating. These include the former British EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, the new Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya and the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Sigrid Kaag. If a successor is not found by the end of August despite the fixed time frame for nominations, one of the four Deputy Director-Generals will temporarily fill the post. Besides Agah, these include Alan Wolff (USA), Yi Xiaozhun (China) and the German Karl Brauner.

The election of the Director-General is not just a question of who should fill the position, but is also a decision about the direction that the organisation will take in future. The Brazilian Azevêdo was considered a diplomat who generally adopted a conciliatory tone in consideration of member states. Quite a few people would like the WTO to be positioned more offensively and more politically, precisely because of signs of increasing protectionism across the globe. In any case, Azevêdo's successor faces a Herculean task. He or she will be charged with advancing reform of the WTO and conducting important negotiations in the areas of electronic trade and agriculture while simultaneously seeking to achieve a balance between rival USA and Chinese interests. As

a result, it is not only a candidate who can credibly drive forward the modernisation of the WTO, but also one who brings political authority and, ideally, ministerial experience. If progress is to be made in reforming the WTO, it will need to be a candidate whom Washington can live with.

Recently, the WTO was impaired in its capacity to operate. Some member states pushed for negotiations to be continued using digital formats. Others, especially many smaller countries, rejected this not least because of capacity constraints. Nevertheless, the last few months at the WTO were still eventful. Faced with a possible slump in world trade this year of between 13% to 32%, the WTO is fighting against its member states engaging in excessive protectionism and is attempting to ensure that the trade-restricting measures introduced by its members are transparent⁴. So far, the WTO has avoided publicly criticising individual member states. Many observers have found fault with this restrained position. By contrast, several member states' representatives have praised the role of the WTO in this crisis.

Despite the turbulent times for the WTO and world trade, there have been initiatives in the last few months which give cause for hope. Demographically or economically mid-sized member states such as Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand and Singapore have launched several initiatives. As part of each of these, a group of WTO members has committed not to adopt additional measures restricting exports of medical equipment or to disrupt global food supply chains. There was even a small ray of hope with respect to dispute settlement. On 30 April, 19 WTO members including several heavyweights such as the EU, China, Canada, Australia, Mexico and Brazil agreed on an interim appeal arrangement for WTO trade disputes. This procedure is based on existing WTO regulations and will only be used until the Appellate Body is operational again. Overall, this solution received much more positive feedback than many voices had suggested beforehand.

⁴ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/export_prohibitions_report_e.pdf

Human Rights & the Alliance for Multilateralism

The 43rd Human Rights Council had been planned for 24 February to 20 March. The usually numerous side events were cancelled just a week into the Council, a move which met with displeasure from the NGOs in particular. The suspension of all further sessions also followed ten days later. Only the results of the 34th Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of 14 states⁵ and the nomination of 19 new special rapporteurs and independent experts⁶ could still be adopted by consensus.

The Council had initially begun with a three-day high-level panel in which over 90 representatives from states and international organisations took part. UN Secretary-General António Guterres delivered an appeal in which he demanded a culture of human rights and identified seven priorities⁷. He urged states not to observe human rights selectively and called for them to be seen as a requirement for state sovereignty, not an impediment to it. Guterres called for multilateralism based on human rights.

The “Alliance for Multilateralism”⁸ initiative launched by Germany and France, among others, met on the side-lines of the Council with both of the countries’ foreign ministers present. The focus was on one of the Alliance’s six initiatives, the so-called “Humanitarian Call for Action” (CfA), as was combating impunity. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas emphasised the special responsibility borne by Germany, which is currently a member of both the Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council, and also pledged €6 million for the chronically underfunded Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Alliance event met with great interest in Geneva, including from diplomatic repre-

sentatives of countries which are not yet members of the Alliance.

The Office of the Human Rights Council also sees the COVID-19 pandemic as a particular challenge for the entire human rights system, has used its experts to develop numerous guidelines to help states deal with the crisis⁹ and called them to liaise with the special procedures. The focus was on the demand for more inclusive approaches in order to protect vulnerable groups from discrimination, structural inequality or from being denied access to the healthcare system. The Office sees the safeguarding of substantive socio-economic rights as central to avoiding social unrest, as is the protection of fundamental political and civil rights in light of many countries’ abuse of emergency measures. As a former doctor and health minister, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has also spoken out frequently in the last few weeks and has developed criteria for a responsible exit from the lockdown¹⁰.

A Bleak Humanitarian Outlook

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, 2020 was already being regarded by several international organisations as the year of the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. Millions of people are now in danger of losing their livelihoods owing to the global recession and the national measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. In addition to famine in several countries, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) suggests that there may soon be an increase in social unrest and conflicts while developmental advances made over several decades could soon be lost. Consequently, a Global Humanitarian Reaction Plan (GHRP) to combat COVID-19 in low and middle income countries was adopted in March as part of a concerted action. However, the original requirements of all of the UN’s humanitarian organisations had to be revised upwards from \$2

⁵ A review of the human rights situation in Italy, El Salvador, Gambia, Bolivia, Fiji, San Marino, Iran, Angola, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Iraq, Slovenia, Egypt and Bosnia and Herzegovina was conducted.

⁶ An overview of the new special correspondents and independent experts can be found [here](#).

⁷ You can find the speech [here](#) and the entire appeal [here](#).

⁸ More information on the six initiatives can be found [here](#), and on the participants [here](#).

⁹ All publications, guidelines and best practices can be found on the [COVID-19 homepage](#).

¹⁰ The five criteria can be viewed [here](#).

billion to \$6.7 billion after a few weeks and the scheme now encompasses 63 countries¹¹.

Despite the surprisingly positive feedback it initially received, the window of opportunity opened by UN Secretary-General Guterres with his call for a global ceasefire will soon close without any great successes. Further efforts at finding solutions for peace in the mediation centre Geneva have come to a halt in the last few months. However, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, recently announced that the Syrian Constitutional Committee is willing to resume negotiations once travel to Geneva is possible again. Virtual meetings, though, are out of the question.

The ILO Warns of the Social Consequences of the Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had deep and far-reaching consequences for the world of work. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), around 68% of employees worldwide are currently affected by the lockdown measures. While working hours equivalent to 130 million full-time positions were lost in the first quarter, the ILO is anticipating an increase of up to 305 million full-time positions globally in the second quarter. It reports that the informal sector in particular has been disproportionately affected with respect to loss of income. Almost two billion people and, as a result, more than half of all employees worldwide are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Relative poverty could increase by up to 21% in developed countries and by up to 56% in countries with low and medium incomes. Consequently, the ILO called for emergency aid and measures to support small and medium-sized businesses in particular, to stimulate the economy, to promote protection at the workplace and to encourage close dialogue between governments, employees and employers. ILO Director-General Guy Ryder urgently called for the inequalities and precariousness of employment that have been laid bare by the crisis to be addressed in the medium and long term.

Personnel Policy – A Dampener for China

On 9 May, Daren Tang (Singapore) was appointed as the new Director-General of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), replacing Francis Gurry of Australia. He had defeated the candidate entered into the race by China, Deputy Director-General of the WIPO, Wang Binying, by 55 votes to 28 in the second round of voting during the election held on 4 March. Countries belonging to the global West, especially the USA, had gone to great diplomatic lengths prior to the election to prevent a Chinese candidate from heading the WIPO. One of the reasons for this was the doubt about her independence from Beijing. It eventually became clear that Tang probably had the best chance against Wang Binying. This led to broad support for his candidature.

Side note: in April, the WIPO reported that China had overtaken the USA in terms of the number of patents submitted.

Commentary

The strengthening of China's global position and Beijing's intention to advance into strategic gaps which have been left open could already be seen in the microcosm of multilateral organisations in Geneva prior to this year. China's announcement that it will invest \$2 billion in the fight against the consequences of the pandemic is one example of this. If the USA pulls back or is seen as a loose cannon, the accusation that Beijing wields excessive influence in international organisations will become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the long run. However, the election of Daren Tang as head of the WIPO shows that China's influence is not unlimited and that the global West is well capable of achieving its priorities when its countries act in concert and seek to cooperate with other actors in good time.

While the impact of the geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China on the work of multilateral organisations has drawn the public's attention, other actors have repeatedly bought initiatives forward in the last few months. The EU has played an increasingly important role in combating COVID-19 in recent weeks. One example is its support of the WHO's global ACT Accel-

¹¹ The updated GHRP is available [here](#).

erator initiative to expedite the fight against the pandemic i.a. by mobilizing financial support through an international donor conference at the beginning of May. Another example is the drafting and the support of a far-reaching resolution for the WHA. In the context of the WTO, the EU was the driving force behind the creation of an interim appeal arrangement with respect to the issue of dispute settlement.

However, other actors have also repeatedly advanced initiatives in both the WHO and the WTO, be it Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand, Singapore or Costa Rica. Even taken together these countries will not be able to fill the gaps that have been left as a result of the USA's partial withdrawal or threat of withdrawal from these bodies. Nevertheless, they have recently made a significant contribution to ensuring that the international community can at least formulate some answers to the huge challenges posed by the crisis.

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